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ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental right of all people but, for the Canadian Aboriginal community it is particularly critical for overcoming historical disadvantages. This document reports on a review of barriers to equal education for Aboriginal people. Key barriers to educational equity include issues of control, keepers of knowledge (teachers versus community), the role of curriculum in reproducing social and cultural inequalities, poverty, and overrepresentation of Aboriginal students in special education. The report makes recommendations for achieving educational equity and social justice in the public school system. Shared decision making is needed in the areas of jurisdiction and control of Aboriginal education programs, and for effective Aboriginal parental involvement in the public education system. A forum for Aboriginal youth to have input intc their education should be created. The underrepresentation and role of Aboriginal teachers and support staff in the public education system warrants discussion. The impact of the current curriculum and ways of incorporating Aboriginal knowledge, languages, and traditions into formal and hidden curricula should be examined. Cross-cultural and anti-discrimination education for all staff and students is needed. Addressing adverse socioeconomic conditions that create unfavorable learning environments for Aboriginal children is an immediate priority. Finally, there should be a critical examination of why Aboriginal students are disproportionately represented in all special education categories except the gifted category. (Contains 59 references.) (TD)

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Barriers to Equal Education for Aboriginal Learners

A Review Of The Literature

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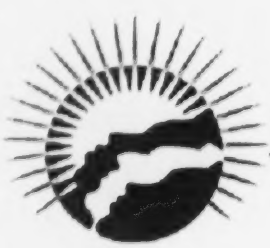

A BC Human Rights Commission Report – May 2001

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2

BACKGROUND 6

CONTEXT 8

ABORIGINAL PEOPLES/ABORIGINAL RIGHTS 8
EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: LEGAL OBLIGATIONS 12

KEY BARRIERS TO EDUCATION EQUITY 16

1. ISSUES OF CONTROL - ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION 16
   - *1.1 "Control," "Consultation," and "Partnership" - Interpreted in Different Ways* 19
   - *1.2 Problem of Different Players Using 'Different Paradigms'* 21
   - *1.3 Who Controls funding of Aboriginal Education?* 22
   - *1.4 Power of School Boards - How Representative Are They? What are Their Policies?* 25
   - *1.5 Aboriginal Parenting Community - Need for Shared Decision Making* 26
   - *1.6 Impact of Canada's Indian Policy Upon Aboriginal Children and Their Families* 29
   - *1.7 Aboriginal Youth - Historically Marginalized in the Process* 32
2. KEEPERS OF THE KNOWLEDGE 34
   - *2.1 Aboriginal Teachers and Support Staff* 34
   - *2.2 Exclusion of the Community (i.e., Elders; Parents) as Role Models* 35
   - *2.3 Need for Cross-Cultural and Anti-Discrimination Education for ALL School Staff and Students* 36
   - *2.4 Examination of the Role of Those in Leadership Positions* 39
3. CURRICULUM - POTENTIAL FOR REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INEQUALITIES? 39
   - *3.1 Curriculum Policy – Approaches to Aboriginal Education in the Public School System* 40
   - *3.2 Impacts of Not Implementing Aboriginal Control of Education* 41
   - *3.3 Current Curriculum- Strong Assimilationist Bent* 42
   - *3.4 Failure to Accommodate Aboriginal Students Holistically* 46
   - *3.5 The Effects of Hidden Curriculum* 46
   - *3.6 Failure to Address Reading and Math Difficulties* 47
4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS - POVERTY 48
5. OVER-REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION CATEGORIES 50

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 53

- *1. Control, Consultation, Partnerships - Need for Shared Decision Making* 55
- *2. Aboriginal Parenting Community - Need for Shared Decision Making* 56
- *3. Aboriginal Youth - Historically Marginalized in the Process* 56
- *4. Aboriginal Teachers and Aboriginal Support Staff* 57
- *5. (a) Core Curriculum* 57
- *5. (b) Influence of Hidden Curriculum* 58
- *6. Cross Cultural and Anti-Discriminatory Education For ALL Staff and Students* 58
- *7. Socio-Economic Factors* 58
- *8. Special Education Categories* 59

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH: 60

REFERENCES CITED 62

Executive Summary

Shortly after the current BC Human Rights Commission was established in January 1997, a number of Aboriginal organizations brought forward their concerns about the lack of success of Aboriginal students in the provincial education system.

These concerns are highlighted in the Ministry of Education report *An Overview of Aboriginal Education Results for Province of BC,* released May 1, 2000. This report identifies:

- Only 38% of Aboriginal students, as opposed to 77% of non-Aboriginal students graduate from grade 12.
- 88% of Aboriginal students progress to Grade 9, as opposed to 96% of non-Aboriginal students

Other Ministry statistics from 1999 show that graduation rates for Aboriginal students throughout the province vary from 5% in Stikine to 66% in Richmond. There has not yet been any research that accounts for the huge variation in success rates, but consultation suggests that there are a range of factors, including, differences in the operation and approach of school districts, the relations between school districts and Aboriginal communities and the social context of Aboriginal people in districts.

Education is a fundamental human right of all people, but for the Aboriginal community it may be particularly critical as a step to overcoming historical disadvantages. In addition, Aboriginal communities are more affected by lack of access to education than most other communities. 45% of the Aboriginal population are under the age of 24. 90% of Aboriginal children are in the public school system. What happens in the public school system will therefore have a tremendous impact on the future of Aboriginal communities.

The Commission consulted with Aboriginal educators and organizations about how the Commission can contribute to the existing efforts to address this issue. As a first step, the Commission conducted research to enable us to design an initiative that builds on what is already known. In doing so, we hope to make a unique contribution to improving K to Grade 12 education for Aboriginal

students in BC. The research provides the Commission a framework for public discussion by:

- Summarizing what is already known about barriers to equal education for Aboriginal students;
- Identifying topics that would benefit from further examination through human rights hearings or other processes available to the Commission;
- Applying a human rights framework to the issues as identified; and
- Identifying gaps in research, reports and public policy responses that could be addressed through human rights hearings or other processes available to the Commission.

The research and consultations makes clear the need to further educate the public about the issues facing Aboriginal students in the public school system. It articulates the need for a provincial forum that can be the catalyst to develop the agreements, understanding and processes that will lead to a new relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the public school system, one that reflects the unique position that Aboriginal peoples occupy within this country and, province.

The research suggests that the following challenges are key to achieving education equity and social justice in the public school system:

1. **Control, Consultation, Partnerships - Need for Shared Decision-Making:** In their 1972 policy paper, "Indian Control over Indian Education," the National Indian Brotherhood stated that Aboriginal Peoples, rather than the federal government, should be controlling Aboriginal education programs. The research and consultation implies that the issues of jurisdiction and control are far from being resolved.

2. **Aboriginal Parenting Community - Need for Shared Decision-Making:** The literature reveals that the Aboriginal parenting community has been, and continues to be, marginalized in the public education system. Therefore, it is necessary to create a separate forum for Aboriginal parents to talk about their experiences and discuss what effective parental involvement might look like.

3. **Aboriginal Youth - Historically Marginalized in the Process:** The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and other key reports have documented the marginalization that Aboriginal youth experience in regard to their education. The research identifies the need to create a forum where the voices of youth can be heard.

4. **Aboriginal Teachers and Aboriginal Support Staff:** The research and consultation implies that in order to achieve education equity the under-representation and role of Aboriginal teachers and support staff in the public education system warrants discussion.

5. **Curriculum:** A literature search and consultation with key educators note the exclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and languages from the current provincial curriculum. In addition, the research implies that the informal or hidden aspects of schooling, such as course selection, school culture, and events, all come together to influence the ability of Aboriginal students as a minority to identify with and connect to the school in both meaningful and productive ways. Public discussion should examine the impact of the current curriculum, and ways of incorporating Aboriginal knowledges, languages, and traditions into both the formal and hidden curriculums.

6. **Cross Cultural and Anti-Discriminatory Education For All Staff and Students:** The literature and consultation suggests the need to explore the issue of cross cultural and anti-discrimination education for all staff and students.

7. **Socio-Economic Factors:** In the long term, achieving equality in education is linked to ending other social and economic inequities. However, consultation and a review of key documents suggest it is an immediate priority for the education system to consider and address the adverse socio-economic conditions that create unfavourable environments for learning and prevent Aboriginal children and youth from participating fully in schools.

8. **Special Education Categories:** Aboriginal students are disproportionately represented in all Special Education categories with the exception of the Gifted category. Statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education and consultation with key educators indicate that the issue warrants a critical examination.

Based on the research and consultation, the Commission has committed to holding public hearings that will provide a forum for exploring the barriers to education equity for Aboriginal students in more detail, and for generating creative solutions for eliminating these barriers.

For more information about the public hearings, please contact Theresa Boulard at:

Victoria: (250) 387-3710
Vancouver: (604) 660-0831
Toll-Free: 1-800-663-0876
or visit our website at www.bchumanrights.org.

Background

Over the past 30 years there have been commissions, public reports, research, pilot projects and other community and government efforts related to improving education for Aboriginal learners. Yet it is obvious from the literature and observation of the situation in British Columbia that Aboriginal children and youth still do not receive equal education. The Commission hopes to contribute to removing barriers and creating equity in education by building on the work that has been done before, and bringing the perspective and authority of a human rights agency to bear on the issues.

The purpose of this preliminary research was to help determine the focus and scope of the public hearings. The recommendations for the focus and scope of the hearings are based on several sources of information, including:

- consultation with key members of the Aboriginal community, partners in the education system, and Commission staff;
- a review and analysis of the relevant literature; and,
- an examination of key human rights instruments (e.g., BC *Human Rights Code*, *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and international treaties).

The focus of the research has been to identify some of the main factors that create barriers to the full participation of Aboriginal students in the public education system. One of our key starting points was a document by Deborah Jeffrey entitled *Summary Report of Selected First Nations Education Documents* (1999). In her report Jeffrey summarizes selected documents (e.g., *A Survey of Contemporary Indians of Canada*, Volume II, 1967; *Indian Control of Indian Education*, 1972; *A Legacy for Learners: The Report of the Royal Commission on Education* (1988); *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Gathering Strength*, (Volume 3), 1996) concerning Aboriginal education. Jeffrey (1999:12) observes that in the works reviewed by her there is the "repeated reference students and parents make to racism and discrimination in schools." She proposes that "[w]e must be honest about the issue of racism and work in partnership to eliminate it from individual, institutional and systemic practice."

In this document we set out to examine the individual, institutional, and systemic practices that perpetuate racism and discrimination within the public school system, and thus serve to alienate Aboriginal learners. What we have

attempted to do is to deconstruct or unpack these primary themes (i.e., racism and discrimination) by talking about:

- issues of control, at both a macro and micro level, within the organizational structure of public education;
- the under-representation of Aboriginal teachers and support staff;
- curriculum and its potential for reproducing social and cultural inequalities;
- the need for cross cultural and anti-discriminatory education for all staff and students;
- socio-economic conditions;
- and over-representation of Aboriginal children in Special Education Categories.

We recognize that the list is by no means exhaustive. However, based on the literature review and consultations, and considering a human rights approach, these appear to be the key barriers or themes that need to be explored. We hope that the hearing process will expand on these issues and identify any other key concerns which have not yet been addressed.

Throughout the process we have been working within a human rights/Aboriginal rights framework. In our literature search we looked to individuals who are situated locally, regionally, across the continent, and internationally. Identification and organization of the key barriers has been informed by the works and thoughts of some of the key figures in the Aboriginal community and education system. We have also built on the approach taken by the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission who have worked since the mid-1980s on education equity for Aboriginal students. For information about the Saskatchewan education equity initiative, please visit: www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/equity.

Following the literature search we received input from several Aboriginal educators and leaders. They assisted us in identifying significant issues that we may have omitted, organizing barriers in a manner that would both capture the key issues and serve to facilitate dialogue, and helped us in tracking reports or sources of information that were relevant to the project. The research findings of key barriers to education equity were also reviewed by the Aboriginal Advisory Committee established to provide guidance to the public hearings.

Context

Aboriginal Peoples/Aboriginal Rights

To contextualize the barriers that are explored in the following sections we commence by discussing the place of Aboriginal Peoples within Canada and thus begin confronting the history of racism, discrimination, and injustice. Consultation with key educators and our literature search reveals that there is a lack of public awareness that:

> First Nation peoples are not "mere" ethnic groups—we are, after all, the First Nations and we do have Aboriginal rights not enjoyed by immigrant ethnic groups. ... [George Calliou, Cree, Sucker Creek in *The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs*, June 2000, pp. 11]

The argument is that Aboriginal Peoples, the original inhabitants of this country, have 'special status' that is different from that of other disadvantaged minority groups, as outlined in the Canadian Constitution. *The Royal Proclamation of 1763* is included in the Canadian Constitution. The Proclamation recognizes the political autonomy of First Nations. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

Policy and practice that is based on multiculturalism may further marginalize Aboriginal peoples, as it obscures the special status of Aboriginal Peoples as the original inhabitants of the land. The thesis is that applying the concept of multiculturalism creates a situation in which Aboriginal peoples' needs and aspirations are deemed to be the same as those of everyone else, thus avoiding the need to confront the history of colonialism.

Given the issue being addressed, it is crucial this discussion acknowledge that:

> Although equal in importance and significance to other rights, Aboriginal rights are viewed differently because they are held only by Aboriginal members of Canadian society. [Borrows and Rotman 1997:11]

Lawyers and scholars John Borrows and Leonard I. Rotman contend that

> This approach to interpreting Aboriginal rights is appropriate because, in many respects, Aboriginal peoples are unique within the wider Canadian population. Before their characterization as *sui generis*, previous common law doctrines often penalized Aboriginal difference. Now, the *sui generis* appellation potentially turns negative characterizations of Aboriginal difference into positive points of protection. Its very existence recognizes that Aboriginal rights stem from alternative sources of law, that reflect the unique historical presence of Aboriginal peoples in North America. [1997:11]

In his report entitled *First Nations Education Finances A Review* Nathan Matthew (1996 :iv) writes:

> First Nations jurisdiction is built on the foundation of inherent, sovereign Aboriginal rights. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 recognized the self-sufficiency of First Nations and their right to enter into treaties with the crown. Aboriginal rights have been affirmed in constitutional developments and the courts have repeatedly admonished the federal and provincial government to respect these rights. Internationally, the United Nations has reiterated that human rights include the right to educate which is locally controlled and supports the child's culture.

Anthropologist Rebecca Bateman speaks directly to the place of Aboriginal Peoples within Canadian society. She writes:

> An aspect of the argument for single citizenship is the contention that special status for Aboriginal peoples is inherently discriminatory and racist. This view disregards the fact that the unique position occupied by Native peoples in Canadian and American society is based not on their skin colour, but on the fact that they are the descendants of the original occupants of North America. Their ancestors entered into alliances, agreements, and treaties with European colonial powers — and, later, with the Canadian and American governments — on a nation-to-nation basis, and their status as Native nations is a political designation that has been formalized administratively and constitutionally. Their uniqueness is not the result of policy or public perception but, rather, of a 500-year history of resistance. Insistence on equal treatment for all serves as a convenient way of eliding a long and frequently violent history between the beneficiaries of colonialism and those who have struggled against it. [Bateman 1997:72-73]

Bateman contends that:

> Equality for all may be a morally attractive (and certainly a politically expedient) objective, but when it is used to deny or downplay a history of enforced inequality it becomes a cynical attempt to promote social amnesia. [Bateman 1997:72-73]

In an article entitled *Inclusiveness and Relevance in First Nations/Public Education System Schooling: It's All About Praxis of Aboriginal Self-Determination in the Tuition Agreement Education Field,* George E. Burns (2000:153) contends that:

> New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Canada alike have historically imposed and continue to impose (albeit along with a range of short lived alternative post modernistic practices) western models of education on the First Peoples. In the field of education, the dominant praxis in Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and Australia has been and continues to be directed towards attempted assimilation of the Native peoples into the majority European culture (the culture of social, economic and political domination), western world view, and western institutions (Armitage, 1995).
>
> In Canada, this is further complicated by the tendency in the public education system to address issues concerning problems of stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and discrimination in the context of problems of multi-culturalism rather than in terms of issues pertaining specifically to the Native people, as a distinct and unique peoples striving to regain self-determination and self-government within the overall fabric of post-colonial Canadian society.

Burns (2000:163) advises that:

> Educators in the public education system need to be educated regarding the *suis generis* (see Hampton in Battiste and Barman, 1995) characteristics of Native education, as determined by the Native peoples and taught by Native people themselves. ...Some provincial jurisdictions espouse policies and practices of Aboriginal empowerment in education. However, at the level of factual performance, Native control of Native education is a non-event.

Finally, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation ("CRRF"), which was proclaimed by the Government of Canada in 1996 "to work at the forefront of efforts to

combat racism and all forms of racial discrimination in Canada", recognizes that:

> ...Aboriginal peoples in Canada are the original inhabitants of this land, and accordingly, that their experiences of racism are not necessarily the same as those of racial and ethnic minorities.
>
> In recognition of the profound racism that Aboriginal people face, the Foundation's Board of Directors created the Task Force on Aboriginal Issues in ...1998. [*CRRF Task Force on Aboriginal Issues Final Report* (1999:3)]

The CCRF Task Force on Aboriginal Issues released its final report in 1999. Key issues identified by the Task Force (1999:6) include:

1. the importance of understanding and acknowledging the history of Canada's treatment of Aboriginal people;
2. the historic and current role of the federal government in failing to protect, honour and give expression to Aboriginal rights;
3. the critical need to improve public awareness of Aboriginal issues in Canada;
4. the importance of addressing and ameliorating media images of Aboriginal people which are erroneous, uninformed, stereotypic and racist; ... .
5. the important work that must be done in our school system (elementary, secondary and post-secondary) to properly address Aboriginal issues; this can only be achieved in consultation with, and in partnership with, Aboriginal people;
7. federal/provincial jurisdictional issues and disputes have impeded the progress and well-being of Aboriginal people socially, culturally and as self-governing nations;

...10. a broad range of services continue to either be denied to, or are difficult to access by, many Aboriginal people.

To conclude, Burns (2000:162) contends that:

> In mainstream schools, curriculum content and curriculum processes fail to acknowledge, reflect, or reinforce the social fact that the Native Peoples are a distinct and unique peoples, a self-determining peoples, a self-governing peoples, a peoples who are striving to regain control over institutions affecting them.

Equality in Education: Legal Obligations

Canada has signed and ratified several international treaties that address equality in education. Ratifying an international treaty means that we have agreed to be bound by that treaty.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is the foundation for all other international human rights treaties. The Declaration says:

1. Everyone has the right to education. ...
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups...
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Since 1976, Canada has been bound by the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. This agreement says:

1. ... education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. ... education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups....

3. ... to have respect for the liberty of parents ... to choose for their children schools, other than those established by public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down... by the State....

Canada has also signed the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which commits us to:

... undertake to adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education, culture and information, with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnic groups...

In 1991 Canada ratified *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* which reaffirms the right of all children to education and includes the specific direction to "take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates". The convention also sets standards for education. Education must support:

> (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
>
> (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms...
>
> (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;

The Convention also provides direction on education for Aboriginal children:

> a child ... who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

Canadian Law

The Constitution of Canada guarantees equality to all Canadians and specifically recognizes and protects the rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

The guarantee of equality is found in Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms:

> (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law, without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.
>
> (2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

The rights of First Nations are also addressed in the Canadian Constitution. The principles underlying *The Royal Proclamation of 1763* are included in the Canadian Constitution. The Proclamation recognizes the political autonomy of First Nations and the inherent nature of their rights, and provides a framework for treaty-making. The treaties made under this framework were understood by Aboriginal peoples to be commitments, by culturally diverse peoples to recognize each other and to live in the same territory on a footing of equality and peace. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

The highest law in Canada therefore recognizes both the equality of all Canadians and the special status of Aboriginal peoples. Legal scholars John Burrows and Leonard Rotman explain that:

> Although equal in importance and significance to other rights, Aboriginal rights are viewed differently because they are held only by Aboriginal members of Canadian society. [Borrows and Leonard 1997:11]

> "Europeans recognized that we were nations and made Treaties with the First Nations peoples on a nation-to-nation basis." Chief Harold Turner of the Swampy Cree Tribal Council in RCAP, Overview of the First Round, Ottawa: The Commission, 1992, at 9

Provincial Law

Provincially, we have a *Human Rights Code* to protect people from discrimination. The purposes of this law include:

> (a) to foster a society in British Columbia in which there are no impediments to full and free participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of British Columbia;
>
> (b) to promote a climate of understanding and mutual respect where all are equal in dignity and rights;
>
> ... (d) to identify and eliminate persistent patterns of inequality associated with discrimination prohibited by this Code;

The *Human Rights Code* and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognizes that achieving equality does not mean treating everyone the same. Sometimes, to achieve equality, groups must be treated in a way that recognizes their unique

characteristics in order for that group to have equality of access. For example, people with disabilities require flexibility and accommodation in schools in order for them to be able to access the school and enjoy the benefits of learning (for example, providing interpreters, special computer programs, learning assistants). While this does amount to different treatment, the result is equality and access to meaningful education, the same education that non-disabled students take for granted.

The *School Act* also recognizes that our education system has an obligation to meet the needs of all students. The *Act* begins with the following statements:

> WHEREAS it is the goal of a democratic society to ensure that all its members receive an education that enables them to become personally fulfilled and publicly useful, thereby increasing the strength and contributions to the health and stability of that society;
>
> AND WHEREAS the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy;

The *Act* also says that parents are entitled to information about their children's education and about the overall effectiveness of education programs in that school district.

When we look at our international commitments, our constitution and our provincial laws it is clear that we have an obligation to provide all children with an education. Equally, we have an obligation to recognize and respect the Aboriginal rights of the "Indian, Inuit, and Metis peoples" of British Columbia.

Key Barriers to Education Equity

1. Issues of Control - Organizational Structure of Public Education

The research and consultation reveals that:

> Aboriginal education has always been practiced on a terrain of intense political negotiations. The negotiations go on at the micro level in day-to-day interactions in the classroom, around the content of lessons, in racist encounters, and in communications between the school and parents. Power relations are also played out at the macro level in the larger arena of school-state relations. [Castellano, Davis, Lahache 2000:251]

It is clear that schools, are "contested public spheres, ...and as political sites for the production and reproduction of power and social inequality, the process of teaching, learning and sharing knowledge enters participants into power relations" (Dei et. al. 2000:15). There is much at stake because, as Rita Bouvier (1995:20) observes:

> The public education system as a major public asset has far reaching consequences for participants and society. The social constructions of race, gender and class affect learning and education. ...The issues are not merely social in nature but are political, cultural and economic. Equally detrimental is the absence of a historical analysis of these concerns, and avoidance to naming the systemic issues and the lack of acknowledgment of prevailing world views in solution making.

Keeping those notions in mind, we explore political negotiations within the public education system, negotiations that take place at both a micro and macro level. The discussion begins in 1972 with the National Indian Brotherhood's landmark policy statement, *Indian Control of Indian Education*. In their policy paper the National Indian Brotherhood stated that Aboriginal peoples, rather than the federal government, should be controlling educational programs. Fifteen years later, Aboriginal peoples' jurisdiction over education was also

examined in the *Tradition and Education, Towards a Vision of Our Future* (Volumes 1, 2, 3) (1988). The research was sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations (Jeffrey 1999; Matthew 1996). More recently, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) recommendations took up many of the themes addressed in previous education reports. Within its recommendations the RCAP report (1996) recognized education as a core area of Aboriginal jurisdiction, tied to the wide-ranging relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canadian society. Our literature search and consultation implies that the concerns regarding jurisdiction and control are far from being resolved.

Although changes have taken place since the production and dissemination of *Indian Control of Indian Education*, Aboriginal education continues to be influenced by the external voices of the state and the educational community. Aboriginal parents and communities, as the core group of stakeholders, continue to be marginalized in the decision-making process. More specifically, some of the points of contention are:

- Aboriginal peoples are under-represented in key decision-making positions;
- many school districts don't have a comprehensive policy, formally supported by the Board of School Trustees, to provide the institutional framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating Aboriginal education; and,
- there appears to be a lack of accountability on the part of government and school districts for funds targeted for Aboriginal learners.

In a report entitled *We Are All Related: Parts 1 & 2* (First Nation Education Services School District 52 (Prince Rupert) (1997:38)), Elizabeth Wilson and Sandra Martin propose changes that will be necessary to implement a vision of education for Aboriginal students who are currently alienated from the school system. Wilson and Martin advocate for structural changes, observing that:

> Lack of knowledge and culturally based assumptions are not the only barriers to change. Their effect is compounded by the organizational and managerial structures that underlie many policies and practices in school districts, government agencies, and government ministries. These structures are so much a part of the public school system that it is difficult to step back and look at them objectively. It is almost impossible to see other possibilities and other options. It is even more difficult to try to develop and implement different structures to meet different needs.

The research and consultation implies a need for a discussion that imagines a re-structured system, one that reflects the unique position that Aboriginal peoples occupy within this country and, province.

Currently, within the public school system, there are a number of authorities which have influence over the education of Aboriginal and other children in British Columbia. In a report entitled *Education Agreements Best Practices Handbook: Achieving an Effective Agreement and a Lasting Relationship* (1997) Barbara Kavanagh provides a summary of the legislation and the network of power relations that shape the education process in British Columbia. Kavanagh observes that:

> In British Columbia, the provincial government administers its Constitutional responsibility for education through the *School Act* and *School Regulation Act*. These acts assign the governance function, or the legislative or policy function, to the Minister of Education at the provincial level, and to boards of school trustees at the local level. Accordingly, the Provincial government is accountable to the electorate for this work, and school boards are empowered to administer legislation and regulations respecting schools and are accountable to the Minister of Education and to the communities which elect them. [1997:21]

The relevant literature indicates that key players involved in the construction of knowledge in British Columbia include: BC Ministry of Education; BC College of Teachers; school boards; district superintendents; principals; vice-principals; teachers; parents; students and the broader community including institutions like the media. In relation to Aboriginal education players also include the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada' Local Education Committees; First Nation Education Coordinators; and the greater Aboriginal community.

Given the complexity of the network of authority within which knowledge is constructed in British Columbia and given that the issue of control is key in discussions regarding the failure of the education systems to provide equal education for Aboriginal children and youth, this section on control has been subdivided. The argument is that a better understanding of the networks of authority within which knowledge is constructed could be useful in restructuring some power relations.

1.1 "Control," "Consultation," and "Partnership" - Interpreted in Different Ways

In this section we examine how power relations are played out at the macro level in the larger arena of school-state relations. Sharing authority in regard to education is a major topic of deliberation between Aboriginal peoples and the various key figures in the public education system. One argument is that in discussions regarding education policy as it relates to Aboriginal peoples, key words such as "control", "consultation", and "partnerships" have been interpreted in different ways. This often leads to frustration among those participating in the discussions and ultimately thwarts meaningful dialogue. An example of how this is discussed in the literature is illustrated in an article entitled *Towards a Shared Understanding in the Policy Discussion about Aboriginal Education*. Written by Frances Abele, Carolyn Dittburner, and Katherine A. Graham (2000:3), the article:

> ... examines the course of public discussion concerning education policy, as it relates to Aboriginal peoples, from 1965 to 1992.

Abele, Dittburner, and Graham (2000:22) observe that:

> Despite constructive developments concerning consultation and cooperation, progress in the discourse on Aboriginal education has been jeopardized by an inability to establish common meanings for key concepts. We see, in several instances, that different participants have adopted different meanings for key words. Concepts such as "control," "local," and "consultation" have been interpreted in a variety of ways. This has bred frustration among participants in the discourse and has contributed to the failure to achieve meaningful dialogue. This conclusion has implications for future deliberations concerning Aboriginal education. Imprecise language may, in some cases, threaten the ability to achieve dialogue.

Nathan Matthew talks about differing interpretations of self-government in a report entitled *First Nations Education Finances: A Review*. Matthew (1996:iv) contends that:

> There continues to be a lack of progress in developing a mutually understood and agreed upon definition of First Nations self-government in general, which includes the field of education.

> There is a strong resistance from the federal and provincial governments to define inherent Aboriginal and treaty rights in a manner agreeable to First Nations. [emphasis added]
>
> Without a strong constitutional position, funding for First Nations education will continue to be determined by non-First Nations politicians. Federal and provincial fiscal constraints are the main determinants of funding levels, not First Nations social, economic and educational needs.
>
> ...In order to deal effectively with national and provincial government education policies, First Nations must have strong, representative voices to ensure adequate resources are allocated to meet identified First Nations educational needs.

The research emphasizes the need for partnerships, but also discusses the need to share information and resources. In an article entitled *Our Peoples' Education: Cut the Shackles; Cut the Crap; Cut the Mustard*, Verna J. Kirkness (1998) speaks to the issue of jurisdiction, partnerships, and sharing of information. Kirkness (1998:11) writes:

> Sadly, the policy of *Indian Control of Indian Education* has not unfolded as was expected. Two factors have been at play that have negatively affected the process. One was the manipulation of Indian Affairs to have us simply administer the schools as they had in the past. The second was our own peoples' insecurity in taking control and failing to design education that would be based on our culture, our way of life, and most important our world view.

Kirkness (1998:12) maintains that:

> ... progress has also been hampered by the interpretation of *Indian Control of Indian Education*. For people in some of our communities who are making changes to the curriculum, they have taken "local control" literally to mean doing everything themselves for their respective schools. They develop programs, methods, and materials, but do not willingly share these with other schools, nor are they prepared to use materials designed by other First Nations schools. This results in duplication, and the value of sharing is lost.

1.2 Problem Of Different Players Using 'Different Paradigms'

> The *Canadian Constitution* assigns jurisdiction for education to the provinces. At the same time, it assigns to the federal government exclusive authority to legislate in respect to "Indians and lands reserved for Indians." [Kavanagh 1997:19]

Further on the subject of control and school-state relations, the literature search implies that federal-provincial jurisdictional issues and disputes are a factor in experiences of the Aboriginal learners within the current public school system.

In that regard, one of the key issues identified by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation Task Force on Aboriginal Issues (1999:6) was that:

> Federal/provincial jurisdictional issues and disputes have impeded the progress and well-being of Aboriginal people socially, culturally and as self-governing nations.

Within the current system the provinces have jurisdiction over education, yet Aboriginal peoples are within the purview of federal jurisdiction. This division of power leaves the Aboriginal learner in an unenviable position in the political machinations of federal-provincial relations. To unwrap the impact of this division of power upon the Aboriginal students and youth, this section addresses the fact that the various key players in the network of power relations are using different criteria in policy discussions regarding Aboriginal education.

An example of where this is discussed is an article entitled *Towards a Shared Understanding in the Policy Discussion about Aboriginal Education* (2000). The authors of the article, Abele, Dittburner and Graham (2000: 22-23), ask:

> How close has policy development in the area of Aboriginal education come to true dialogue?

They (2000:22-23) proceed to explain that:

> ...the achievement of a common vision is being frustrated because different players are using different paradigms. In particular, we've seen the **federal government** and **Aboriginal organizations focus** on education **within the context of governance**, while **provincial governments focus** on **multiculturalism** and **human rights.** [emphasis added]

> ...More fundamental features of Canada and its mode of governance have also stood in the way of dialogue. The essential power relationship between the federal and provincial governments and Aboriginal peoples, the vagaries of funding for Aboriginal organizations, and the entanglement of Aboriginal issues with Canada's broader unity deliberations are just three of many influences on what has occurred.

More specifically, the literature and consultations suggests that the government legislation such as the *Indian Act*, serves to constrain and alienate Aboriginal people, and thus acts as a barrier to the public education system. The discussion turns to the work of Evelyn Peters and her article entitled *Aboriginal People in Urban Areas* (1996). She writes (1996:308-309):

> Aboriginal people living in urban areas are subject to a complicated legal regime. ... The complex amalgam of legal categories that has emerged has created inequalities for and among urban Aboriginal people.

1.3 Who Controls funding of Aboriginal Education?

Given the importance of funding and the power of those who control the funding, this discussion begins by examining how monies are distributed within the public education system. Consultation with key educators implies that the consequences of the lack of Aboriginal voices in key positions, positions in which policy and funding decisions are being made will warrant exploration.

As explained in *Education Agreements Best Practices Handbook*, prepared for the First Nations Education Steering Committee, DIAND and the Ministry of Education by Barbara Kavanagh (1997:19):

> The Canadian Constitution assigns jurisdiction for education to the provinces. At the same time, it assigns to the federal government exclusive authority to legislate in respect to "Indians and lands reserved for Indians." Further, the *Indian Act* allows the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to operate schools, as well as to enter into agreements with provincial and territorial governments and School Boards regarding the education of registered Indian children from ages six to seventeen inclusive who live on reserves or Crown land.

Thus, the federal government pays the provincial government on a per capita basis for on-reserve Aboriginal children who are registered under the *Indian Act* and are enrolled in public school. The consultations identified that accountability for the federal funds is an on-going concern for many

communities. At the macro level, the concern is that, although the provincial government receives tuition funds for Aboriginal children, the children do not receive an education equal to that received by non-Aboriginal children.

Christa Williams, First Nations Education Steering Committee (April 1997:19), describes one mechanism that was intended to support accountability and to provide the Aboriginal community with a measure of control over the education of their children:

> The provincial government has passed the School Act which "provides the legal framework for the Provincial education system today" (Matthew, 1996: p. 45). Within *the School Act* there is little room for First Nations to exert influence or participate in decision-making regarding the education of First Nations learners in the public system. Amendments were made in 1989 to enable First Nations to enter into Local Education Agreements with school boards, but to date the success of these agreements, and even the ability to negotiate an agreement, seems to be dependent on many subjective factors - the primary factor being the willingness of the parties to negotiate.

Provincial funding is also provided through targeted Aboriginal Education funding. Kavanagh (1997:45) summarizes the role of this funding:

> The provincial government provides targeted funding to enhance the standard education and to ensure that the provincial system is responsive to the needs of students of Aboriginal ancestry, which includes First Nations students.

The research raises questions about the appropriate use of the targeted Aboriginal funding. For example, is it the responsibility of targeted Aboriginal funding to, at the outset, fund an accurate portrayal of the history of this land. It can be argued that the responsibility to develop an accurate historical curriculum is the responsibility of those who control the funding for the education system as a whole – the Ministry . This is because it is not just Aboriginal children who need a more inclusive representation of history. In fact, it is just as important for non-Aboriginal students to be made aware of a more inclusive representation of the history of this country to ensure that systemic ignorance is not perpetuated.

This is not to suggest that local communities should not develop curriculum. It is obvious that in the past this has been the only way the curriculum changed and the experience can only be considered empowering. However, the system is not set up, yet, for this to be a regular occurrence. This type of initiative must

come from the Ministry to ensure that teachers and school boards put it into practice. In that regard Jo-ann Archibald, who is a member of the Sto:lo Nation and the Director of the First Nations House of Learning, UBC, writes:

> I believe that locally developed Native Studies curricula are accepted more readily and used more meaningfully in band-controlled schools than in the public school system. [1995:310]

Funding levels, human resources, and infrastructure for Aboriginal education programs are not realistically based on achieving success, given the past and current barriers experienced by the Aboriginal community. To improve the system, to create equality, these areas need to be addressed realistically. Implementation of policy decisions needs to occur with corresponding resources and programming commitments on a level contingent with success.

For example, although Aboriginal education committees may find themselves with a certain amount of funding to allocate, the reality is that they are forced to allocate these funds to augment what should rightly be in the ambit of responsibility of the Ministry: academic success, retention of students, professional development of non Aboriginal teachers, curriculum development which reflects a post colonial mindset. As a result, too often, cultural and language initiatives are deprived as education committees are forced to try to fix problems the system has generated and failed to adequately address.

Lorna Williams, who is currently on leave from Vancouver School District No. 39 while being a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee addresses the issue of funding in an article entitled *Urban Aboriginal Education: The Vancouver Experience* (2000). Williams (2000:144), who is a Lil'wat, from Mount Currie, British Columbia writes:

> Since 1984, it has been an ongoing yearly challenge to ensure that the provincially transferred Aboriginal education funds designated for Aboriginal students are spent appropriately and effectively. This has meant continually educating new district administrators and school board trustees and interpreting the funding guidelines for them. Each school district receives a basic amount for educating every student, including First Nations students. The designated funds provided to districts from the provincial government are intended to enhance and enrich services for Aboriginal students, not to bear the total costs of educating First Nations students.

Finally, in a discussion of the process for distributing funding from government to school boards for Aboriginal students, Nathan Matthew (1996:60-61) cautions:

> The strategies used by the provincial government to reduce its deficit will probably effect First Nations learners in the years to come. The notion of protecting certain budget areas by the targeting of funds, such as the Aboriginal education and special education funds, as well as the provision of specific grants, such as the Aboriginal education grants will come under pressure. ...
>
> First Nations communities and organizations will continue to be impacted by provincial education jurisdiction until First Nations jurisdiction is resolved...

1.4 Power of School Boards - How Representative Are They? What are Their Policies?

School boards have a major role in the network of power relations that structure the experiences of Aboriginal children and youth in the public school system. The importance of school boards is discussed by scholars Ron Mackay and Lawrence Myles. In an article entitled *A Major Challenge for the Education System: Aboriginal Retention and Dropout* (1995), Mackay and Myles present the finding of their survey into the causes of dropout among Aboriginal youths in Ontario schools as well as reasons for success among the same students. They (1995:173) observe that:

> Boards of schools with high Native graduation rates recognize Native students both on and off reserve as legitimate clients whose particular needs and characteristics they are willing to address.
>
> In an increasingly multicultural society, the school board is sensitive to all minority students and actively promotes multicultural and anti-racist education. However, the school board acknowledges a **special obligation** to **promoting** the **success** of **Native students, who for historical reasons can be considered an 'involuntary minority'**... . [emphasis added]

Furthermore, at issue is the fact that although the function of school boards has been to allow for community perspective, for the Aboriginal community, their role has been marginalized, due to the fact that school boards are primarily comprised of non-Aboriginal members. In her report entitled *Building Strong*

Communities Through Education and Treaties - Discussion Paper, Christa Williams (April 1997:53) observes that:

> At present there is no existing example of guaranteed Aboriginal representation on school boards.

1.5 Aboriginal Parenting Community - Need for Shared Decision Making

The literature reveals that historically and currently the Aboriginal parenting community has been, and continues to be, marginalized in the public education system. Many education researchers argue that Aboriginal parents must play a major role in the education of their children and yet they are generally excluded from the decision making process.

In that regard, in their 1972 policy paper the National Indian Brotherhood, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, advocated for "parental responsibility" and "local control". *Gathering Strength: Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Vol. 3), (1996:468-469] discusses the current situation as it relates to the decision-making rights Aboriginal parents and families enjoy:

> Certainly, Aboriginal involvement in the direct delivery of education has increased substantially since the early 1970s. ...however, and despite traditions of local control and parental involvement in Canadian education, representation of Aboriginal parents on boards of education and other educational institutions is limited. This is true for both provincial and territorial public schools... .

In the following passages are excepts of discussions as they relate to the role of Aboriginal parents in the public education system, addressing the importance of a system that is more inclusive of parents. For example, in her article entitled *Our Peoples' Education: Cut the Shackles; Cut the Crap; Cut the Mustard*, Kirkness (1998:13) addresses the role of Aboriginal parents in the education system. She observes that:

> We say that parents must play a major role in the education of their children, yet in many communities parents have no idea what is going on in school. They are rarely invited to meetings to decide on directions to be taken. They are rarely asked for their original thoughts on how or what should be done in certain situations. School board meetings are often closed meetings.

Carl Urion, in an article entitled *Changing Academic Discourse About Native Education: Using Two Pairs of Eyes* (1999), identifies a number of practical questions that must be addressed in discussion about Aboriginal peoples, formal education, and schooling in Canada. Urion (1999:14) proposes that one of the primary questions that must be addressed is:

> How does the present pattern of school administration seem to discredit parental and family involvement in education and only allow its support for schooling on "school" terms?

Métis scholar Kathy L. Hodgson-Smith (2000:167) concurs with Kirkness and Urion, stating that:

> Drop-out rates of Aboriginal students in Canadian schools have remained high despite the vast amount of research conducted in an effort to alleviate this problem. **Aboriginal parents** are still on the **periphery** of **educational decision making** regarding their children's education. [emphasis added]

In the United States, scholars Carol Robinson-Zanartu and Juanita Majel-Dixon (1996:33) surveyed 234 American Indian parents and community members representing fifty-five bands or tribes regarding their "attitudes about education, satisfaction with schools, the degree to which schools value Indian culture, their involvement with schools, and school expectations for their children." The results of their survey were documented in an article entitled *Parent Voices: American Indian Relationships with Schools* (1996). Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996:33-34) present the following thoughts of "American Indian parents and community members":

> "Do schools understand this is a completely different world for these children... Why don't they listen or be informed? ...Respect Indian children for who they are... Teach them to be proud... Meet with us!"

Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996:33-34) state that:

> We know that both parent attitudes toward schools and school attitudes of respect for students' languages and cultures are related to students' academic achievement... . However, even following the legislation of parent involvement, schools, especially public schools, often have given only lip service to this reality.

In Alberta, Tracy Friedel was invited by a group of Aboriginal parents to conduct a study exploring the conditions of schooling for their children in a specific public urban setting. Taking a "holistic perspective" she focused her study on examining the role of parents in that system. In a resulting article entitled *The Role of Aboriginal Parents in Public Education: Barriers to Change in an Urban Setting* Friedel (1999:139-140) writes:

> A significant body of research has identified parental involvement as an important component of public schooling. Primarily, this discussion has focused on the positive relationship between parental involvement and student achievement.
>
> ...A great deal of the research in this area has tended to focus on mainstream groups, despite the fact that, "parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse students ... often fail to participate in the schools in numbers comparable to other majority group parents" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 20 in Friedel).
>
> ...Although many education researchers have validated the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement, they have not investigated these issues from the perspective of Native parents.

In 1985 the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission released a report entitled *A Report on Indian/Native Education in Saskatchewan*. Within its report the Commission recommended involving Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. Suggestions included making schools more friendly, encouraging teachers to be available to parents on a flexible basis, and encouraging parents to participate in all aspects of school life.

A BC example is drawn from a 1998 study commissioned by the First Nations Education Council of School District No. 73 (Kamloops/Thompson), which revealed that:

> .. there is research showing that the way schools support First Nations students at risk is not as effective and sensitive to needs as teachers believe. A more proactive relationship with First Nations families, a different kind of participation of classroom teachers in the support process, and more flexibility in the application of procedures related to student responsibilities are implied by the research.

1.6 Impact of Canada's Indian Policy Upon Aboriginal Children and Their Families: Residential Schools, Boarding Homes, and Child Welfare System

The research implies that in addressing the involvement of the Aboriginal parenting community in the public school system it is critical to acknowledge that:

> For a century or more, DIAND [Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development] attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal world-views, cultures, and languages. ...Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages, and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. [Battiste 1998: viii]

In order to develop an education system that includes Aboriginal parents in the decision-making process regarding the education of their children, the legacy of residential schools, boarding homes, and the child welfare system must be addressed.

The outcomes of residential schools, institutions which left parents feeling marginalized and disempowered, are referenced in the report entitled *Improving School Success For First Nations Students* (1998), (Kamloops/Thompson School District). The researchers maintain that:

> Experiential background of families is another well-known determiner of school success. ...That many First Nations elders were educationally isolated from the greater community by the residential school process means that academic success of a kind found in the mainstream schooling is a very recent experience for most families.

Educator Jean Barman also addresses the crippling after effects of residential schools. In an article entitled *Aboriginal Education at the Crossroads: The Legacy of Residential Schools and the Way Ahead* (1996:294-295), Barman observes:

> Although residential schools have disappeared from the Canadian educational landscape in favour of a mix of provincial, private, and band schools, their legacy endures. The consequences are still being lived across British Columbia and in the rest of Canada: ... .

> Half or fewer British Columbia Aboriginal children of past generations actually attended residential school at any point in time, but numbers were sufficient for family life to deteriorate.
>
> ...Much the same deterioration occurred with language and culture. If not banned outright, both were so disparaged in school that they were among its casualties: ...
>
> In some cases families themselves were complicit in the disappearance of language and culture in order to protect their children. ... .
>
> The self-fulfilling prophecy inherent in racism came to fruition as Aboriginal peoples deemed to be inferior were schooled for inequality and thereby largely did end up in the bottom ranks of Canadian society. Personal testimonies are revealing: "The residential school (not just the one I went to — they were the common form of Indian education all across Canada) was the perfect system for instilling a strong sense of inferiority"

Further, in an article entitled *Taking Control: Contradiction and First Nations Adult Education* (1995, 1999), Celia Haig-Brown writes:

> Students and First Nations instructors specified residential schools as prime sites for developing cultural self-hatred.

Finally, in Aboriginal youth focus groups (in Vancouver and Prince Rupert), conducted by Viewpoints Research (1997) participants addressed the impact of residential schools upon their parents and subsequently upon themselves, stating that:

> I think most of our parents were from residential schools where they were seen as this inferior race. [Out of School Youth]

Boarding homes were another system of intervention after residential schools. Our research and consultations suggest that there is a paucity of information regarding boarding homes, but it is clear that it was yet another way that children were separated from their parents and siblings and as such it warrants further discussion.

Government intervention continues to marginalize Aboriginal parents and to disempower them through the child welfare system. This system isolates

Aboriginal children from their culture and language as well as from role models in their communities.

In the last 30 years, residential schools have closed, but government intervention continues to marginalize and disempower Aboriginal Parents, and to remove Aboriginal children from their communities, through the child welfare system. The impact of Canada's Indian Policy upon Aboriginal children and their families is addressed in *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (1997). Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, the text's authors, reveal the experiences of Aboriginal children in Canada, from first contact through residential schools and later the seizure of Aboriginal children by social workers, who arranged the adoption of thousands of children by non-native families.

Ernie Crey, a member of the Sto:lo Nation, documented his experiences as a ward of the state. He (1997:34) writes:

> Growing up as a government ward made me very cynical about the collaboration between the government and the evangelistic Christians who were "saving" Indian kids from their own families. Again I felt echoes of my father's residential school experience. We were kept from our families to hasten our assimilation into the white world. We were told our culture was inferior and doomed to extinction. My last foster family was an aged German-Canadian couple who practiced relentless evangelism. ...I ended up in several different high schools but still managed to maintain a B average. Counselors knew I was bright and could do better. But I was continually dogged by anxiety, worrying about my siblings and my mother. [in Fournier and Crey (1997)]

It should be noted that the new *Child, Family and Community Service Act* introduced by the B.C. government in 1996 calls for Aboriginal bands to be involved in the planning regarding any of the children in care. Fournier and Crey (1997:92) observe that:

> ...despite these important steps, there is still a long [way] to go. More than 52 per cent of all children taken into care in B.C. each year as a result of court orders are Aboriginal, and a staggering 78 percent of Aboriginal children in permanent care in B.C. are still placed with non-native caregivers. Both Aboriginal bands and activist groups have warned that they can't take over social services without adequate financing.

The research implies that past and continuing practices that remove Aboriginal children from their homes, communities and culture results in barriers to the

involvement of the Aboriginal parenting community in the decision-making process at schools. For example, in a text entitled *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling*, George J. Sefa Dei et. al. (2000:214) observe that parents who are most successful in dealing with the school system are those who are able to tap into the institutional language of schools and present concerns according to the established protocol. Thus, in the process of creating a system that is more inclusive of the Aboriginal parenting community it is necessary to consider the historical role of Aboriginal parents in the process.

1.7 Aboriginal Youth - Historically Marginalized in the Process

Thus far we have conveyed that the power relations that are played out in the arena of school-state relations have an impact upon Aboriginal youth and children within the public school system. We have talked about the role of school boards in the system. We have also stated that the role of the parenting community is key to the issue being addressed.

Here we want to acknowledge that Aboriginal children and youth comprise an critical part of the public education system. The literature suggests that the drop-out rates of Aboriginal students in Canadian schools have remained high despite the vast amount of research conducted in an effort to address the issue (*Improving School Success For First Nations Students* (1998) (Kamloops/Thompson School District)).

The Royal Commission (1996) and other key reports have documented the marginalization that Aboriginal youth experience in regard to their education. The RCAP report (Volume 3) (1996:477) conveys that:

> Parents are not the only ones who feel unable to shape the education process significantly. Youth themselves are excluded. The Commission heard testimony from youth that, although their present and future are at stake, they are rarely involved in decisions about their education. The same difficulties are present in public and Aboriginally controlled schools alike. This sense of disempowerment signals that the experience of youth is out of alignment with statements by Aboriginal leaders who place hope and trust in youth as the next generation of leaders.

The following citation, which appears in *Perspectives and Realities*, report of the Royal Commission (Vol. 4) (1996:151), speaks of the need to include Aboriginal youth in the decisions concerning all aspects of their lives, including education.

Tonya Makletzoff, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories expressed the following to Commissioners:

> A lot of things that have been put in place for youth don't work because they haven't consulted youth themselves. It is time for us to start doing things as young people because no one is going to do it for us. We can't wait for the government or the community to do things. We have to work with them.

More recently, the concerns of Aboriginal youth were documented in *Improving School Success For First Nations Students* (1998) (Kamloops/Thompson School District). The Report conveys that:

> Many First Nations students tell of being alienated by the school system, and say those listening to them do not understand what is being said. Although unsuccessful students do feel the discomfort of failure, studies show that First Nations students often have different interpretations to what might be thought as everyday school events. These interpretations are derived from the differences that made them who they are, students from a First Nations culture. At other times, the students tell of the discomfort they feel as minority in a majority culture, knowing that others might hold racist and cultural views of them. They feel that more First Nations staff members would be helpful in dissipating some of this alienation. ...Secondary students in particular are old enough to become partners with their teachers, and ways in which they can be more openly consulted about such things need to be found.

The literature suggests that student partnerships should be encouraged, as early as elementary school (Dei et. al. 2000:232).

> In addressing the concerns of youth it is important to recognize students as individuals within society who are affected by much more than what occurs within the confines of the school, and it is these issues that must be taken up when addressing youths' needs. This would include issues such as poverty, substance abuse, and apprehension by the state (Dei. et. al. 2000).

Furthermore, drawing upon "The National Report of Exemplary School Projects", Dei et. al. (2000:149) propose that:

> Success should be defined such that the learner's expectation, the extent of community involvement, non-academic proficiencies... are recognized and valued by educators. This educational approach helps to improve and sustain the learner's self-esteem, pride and sense of identity, while also encouraging a belief in the relevance and utility of education for the individual student, and for the benefit of her/his community.

In an article entitled *Issues of Pedagogy in Aboriginal Education*, Métis scholar Kathy L. Hodgson-Smith (2000:167) writes:

> **Drop-out rates of Aboriginal students** in Canadian schools **have remained high** despite the vast amount of research conducted in an effort to alleviate this problem.
>
> ...Pedagogical issues remain at the heart of the matter because **students make the final judgment and students themselves remain voiceless.** [emphasis added]

Finally, Rita Bouvier, in an article entitled *Critical Education For Aboriginal Youth: A Balance to Conserve and to Create* (1995:20) advises that:

> We need to understand the issues from the perspective of our Aboriginal youth. This will require that we listen not only with our ears and head but with our hearts. Systems and those who work within them have a tendency to adopt control strategies.

2. Keepers Of The Knowledge

Teachers and support staff have a key role in public education and the literature confirms their importance in relation to Aboriginal students. Given the complexity of the role of educators, we have made discussion of these "disseminators of knowledge(s)" a separate category which can be further subdivided into the various themes that emerged in the literature.

2.1 Aboriginal Teachers and Support Staff

The research and consultation implies that in order to achieve equity in education the under-representation and role of Aboriginal teachers and support staff in the public education system must be addressed. For one, employment equity and diversity in the public education system is crucial to inclusive education and the corresponding issue of power sharing. Second, Aboriginal teachers and support staff can serve as role models for Aboriginal students, provide cultural resources for the school culture as well as validate difference for all students.

In the following passages are excerpts of discussions as they relate to Aboriginal teachers and support staff. For example, in her article entitled *Native Indian Teachers: A Key to Progress* Verna J. Kirkness (1999:61) writes:

> Throughout the literature we witness the concepts of Indian identity, traditions, psychology, culture, language, and history as being important in the education of Indians. It is appropriate to suggest that Indian teachers would be the most effective in transmitting these concepts.

In addition, there is also the issue of how Aboriginal teachers are perceived and located. Haig-Brown (1995/99:280), in her discussion of the Native Education Centre (Vancouver), recounts the experiences of one of the Aboriginal teachers at the Centre. The teacher provided an example of the issues she is faced with when she teaches in the Centre:

> One thing I've noticed ever since I've been working with adults is that, because the students are also exposed to non-Native instructors, is that sometimes just because I'm Indian they think I'm not competent as an instructor... I guess they're so conditioned to thinking white instructors know the curriculum. [in Haig-Brown 1995/99:280]

Lastly, regarding the education of the Aboriginal educators, Maori scholar Graham Hingangaroa Smith in his article entitled *Maori Education: Revolution and Transformative Action* (2000:70), urges that:

> Where indigenous people are in educational crisis, indigenous educators and teachers must be trained as change agents to transform these undesirable circumstances. They must develop a radical pedagogy (a teaching approach for change). Such pedagogy must also be informed by their own cultural preferences and respond to their own critical circumstances.

2.2 Exclusion of the Community (i.e., Elders; Parents) as Role Models

The relationship between low self-esteem and high drop out rates of Aboriginal students has been addressed in both the literature and during consultations. In *Stolen From Our Embrace* (1997) Fournier and Crey write:

> Role models are invaluable to young Aboriginal students battling shaky self-esteem and uncertainty about their goals.

The role of elders, as role models and teachers, in Aboriginal education is also discussed in *Gathering Strength* (1996:525):

> Elders have always played a central role in Aboriginal education, which is fundamentally an inter-generational process. Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers.

Currently, the situation is such that:

> To the despair of the elders, when they try to become involved in the education process, they find many obstacles. There have been few resources in the school systems to support the involvement of elders. The fact that they are not given compensation comparable to that of other teachers and professionals sends a clear message that their knowledge and expertise are not valued.

On the same topic, Kirkness (1998:13) observes that:

> Not properly addressing the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create a quality education for our people. How can we learn about our traditions on which to base our education if we don't ask the Elders? Little is written by our people that we can turn to for this information.
>
> ...When they are gone, their valuable knowledge goes with them. It's like losing a whole library and its archives.

2.3 Need for Cross-Cultural and Anti-Discrimination Education for ALL School Staff and Students

In a text entitled *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling*, George J. Sefa Dei et. al. (2000:188) maintain that:

> Schools must become a primary area for anti-discrimination and human rights education that confronts issues of access and equity in society. Programming that targets various forms of discrimination and unravels the relationships of power that sustain them are necessary to contribute to the goal of "safe schools" as sites where all students are free from harassment.

Participants in the CRRF Task Force on Aboriginal Issues (1999) urge that education in schools must better address issues of racism affecting Aboriginal people. Participants suggest that an appropriate role for the CRRF would be supporting research on education policy and curriculum.

In regard to the effectiveness of current cross-cultural awareness programs, a study commissioned by the Kamloops/Thompson School District (1998) reveals that:

> Regrettably, the research shows that most of **the usual culture and racism sensitivity programs have not been too effective.** We apparently don't know how to predictably remove prejudice, but at least we can insist upon an overt tolerance of differences. This does not mean we shouldn't try to do more, especially with cross-cultural education.
>
> The research provides some clues: prejudice is an attitude, and attitudes result from emotional conditioning. An attitude is unlikely to change unless emotional reconditioning takes place. [emphasis added]

June Williams (2000) maintains that:

> Teacher training does little to prepare teachers to know how to create collaborative classrooms, co-operative relationships, and build critical pedagogy within the classroom.

In the approach adopted by Williams, and in the one used in this research, pedagogy is defined as "the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce" (David Lusted in Lather 1991:15). This concept of pedagogy "focuses attention on the conditions and means through which knowledge is produced" (Lather 1991:15).

Further, the reality is that many Aboriginal children and youth in the provincial school system will spend most of their time in the classroom with non-Aboriginal educators (*Gathering Strength: Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Volume 3) (1996:498)). The Royal Commission (1996:498) states that:

> The values reinforced by the teacher, the inclusion or exclusion of Aboriginal materials and perspectives in the course, the type of interaction in the classroom, and the relationship between teachers and parents will all affect the comfort of the Aboriginal student. Other education staff - principals, counsellors and psychologists - make professional decisions every day that affect the lives of children.

The Royal Commission (1996:498) recommends that:

> All these educators must be able to fulfill their professional responsibilities with sensitivity and energy to help students blossom.

The argument is that educators, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, need to take critical anthropology, history, and sociology courses within their studies prior to teaching. Workshops would be required for teachers in the field. The urgent need for cross-cultural training for teachers is discussed by John Taylor, a non-Native educator in an article entitled *Non-Native Teachers Teaching in Native Communities* (1995). Based on personal experiences at reserve schools Taylor (1995: 241) writes:

> Non-native teachers should be responsible for educating themselves about the community, culturally appropriate content, and culturally appropriate teaching methods. However, more effective non-Native teaching on reserves could be more easily achieved through organized teacher education in cross-cultural teaching specific to Native people. ...Part of the answer is training workshops for working non-Native teachers (and perhaps Native teachers) which aim at increasing their awareness of their roles and effective teaching styles.

Taylor (1995:241) contends that:

> One important area which has not been addressed is hiring. The people responsible for hiring need to give greater consideration to hiring people who are suitable for cross-cultural teaching.

Taylor (1995:241) concludes, stating that:

> Most Native children will be taught by non-Native teachers. There have been many attempts to improve education for Canada's Native people. Yet little attention has been paid to improving training for the large non-Native teaching force which will continue to exist for a long time. When this issue is addressed by teacher education facilities, band school administrations, and by the teachers themselves the results should benefit Native students immediately.

Cree scholar Ida Swan (1998:49) advises that:

> In the northern communities of Saskatchewan, as in any geographical area where Indian children are taught, the educators, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, must change their instructional methods to accommodate the

> Aboriginal teaching styles of the communities. The educators must become active learners of the traditional teaching patterns so that they can enhance the quality of education that they transmit to the children (Gilliland 1992; Brown, 1979; Battiste, unpublished).

2.4 Examination of the Role of Those in Leadership Positions (e.g., Principals, Superintendents)

Equally important in the public education system as it relates to Aboriginal children and youth are those in leadership positions, namely principals and superintendents. In their article *A Major Challenge for the Education System: Aboriginal Retention and Dropout* (1995), Mackay and Myles present the finding of their survey into the causes of dropout among Aboriginal youths in Ontario schools as well as reasons for success among the same students. Regarding the role of principals within the system, they (1995:174) observe that:

> Schools in which Native students enjoy a high rate of success are those with principals who actively promote strategies for maximizing the academic success of all their students and are capable of engaging their teaching and support staff in the same mission.

Consultation with key educators indicates that currently there is a lack of Aboriginal people in key positions. For example, there are no Aboriginal superintendents in British Columbia. There are a few Aboriginal principals but not many.

3. Curriculum - Program of Studies - Potential for Reproduction of Social and Cultural Inequalities?

> Curriculum, research methods, pedagogy: all are much contested cultural terrain. [Lather 1991: xvi]

The literature search, as well as consultation with key educators, indicates the exclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and languages from the current provincial curriculum is a barrier to equality of education for Aboriginal learners. The problem of exclusion is perpetuated by the system's failure to acknowledge that curriculum is very much contested terrain and to examine the relationship between the production of knowledges and power.

In an article entitled *Anti-racist Education and the Curriculum—A Privileged Perspective* (1992) N. Allingham defines curriculum as follows:

> Curriculum is the textbooks and storybooks, the pictures and the seating plan and the group work and the posters and the music, the announcements, the prayers and the readings; the languages spoken in the school, the food in the cafeteria, the visitors to the classrooms, the reception of parents in the office, the races (or race) of the office staff, the custodial staff, the teachers, the administration, the display of student work, the school teams and the sports played, the clubs, the school logo or emblem, the field trips, the assignments and projects, the facial expressions and body language of everybody, the clothes everybody wears. It is the Whole Environment. [in Dei et. al. 2000:175]

Applying this definition curriculum, the literature identifies a need to examine the extent to which equity for Aboriginal students is promoted in the visual/physical landscape of schools and classrooms. Research and consultation also emphasizes the obligation to decolonize the current curriculum and incorporate Aboriginal knowledges and languages within public education. Finally, the literature and consultation encourages exploring a holistic approach to education.

Therefore, in this section we use the term curriculum in a very broad sense. Here we will discuss approaches to Aboriginal education in the public school system, the impact of control over funding for Aboriginal education, the result of not implementing Aboriginal control of education, the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge(s) into a Western-based curriculum, the incorporation of a more holistic approach to educational practices, and the effects of hidden curriculum.

3.1 Curriculum Policy – Approaches to Aboriginal Education in the Public School System

To give you a sense of the issues that are being raised in regard to curriculum in general we have presented excerpts from the works of some key individuals. First, in a text entitled *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling*, George J. Sefa Dei et. al. (2000:14) explain how they have conceptualized the literature on school inclusivity into two broad categories:

> "diversity as a variety perspective" and "diversity as a critical perspective." The first approach to inclusion is exemplified as viewing diversity in terms of teaching and sharing knowledge about contributions of diverse cultures to enrich plural communities. ...

> Generally, inclusive schooling practices embedded in this approach have the educational agenda to develop better inter-group communications, enhance co-operation and tolerance for people of diverse backgrounds, and foster respect for social difference (Bracy, 1995, pp. 3-5). ...This approach to inclusion does not lead to equity, nor does it challenge power, identity or representational issues in education. In fact, the approach fails to rupture difference as the context for power and domination in schools and society.
>
> The second approach to inclusivity adopts "diversity as a critical perspective" where **schooling is seen as a racially, culturally and politically mediated experience**. This approach deals directly with marginalization and exclusion in school contexts by centering all human experiences in the process of learning. In the analysis, the focus is placed on the twin notions of power and domination in order to understand and interpret social relations and structures... .

Speaking specifically to the issue of how to incorporate Aboriginal issues and knowledge(s) into the curriculum, Urion (1999:14) proposes that the following questions must be addressed:

> How do we deal with Treaty rights in the curriculum?
>
> What practical techniques and technologies allow us to improve written history with our knowledge of oral history without doing discredit to either?

3.2 Impacts of Not Implementing Aboriginal Control of Education

> When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. [Rosaldo in Dei et. al. 2000:171]

The following passage was extracted from the *Gathering Strength: Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (*Volume 3) (1996:456-460):

> Although the National Indian Brotherhood articulated the principle of "Indian control of Indian education" in 1972, more than two decades later, Aboriginal children are still consuming the standard curricula of mainstream educational institutions. Adding Aboriginal content to curriculum usually consists of adding units designed to 'enrich' existing

curriculum content rather than changing the core assumptions, values and logic of the curriculum itself.

In a text entitled *Making the Spirit Dance Within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal Community* Celia Haig-Brown, Kathy L. Hodgson-Smith, Robert Regnier, and Jo-ann Archibald (1997:23-24; 29; 30) observe that:

> An examination of current school and university curricula in much of Canada demonstrates that assumptions of European superiority continue to be an organizing force in the way that we select the content to which we expose the children and adults in our educational institutions. When members of a society with these beliefs meet with the original people of the Americas, there can only be disruption.
>
> ...When schools can acknowledge the place of Aboriginal peoples since time immemorial, in history, and in the current context of Canadian society, the children will have an opportunity to grow into the fullness of our history.
>
> ...The Assembly of First Nations (1988) and the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) argue for truth telling and the reparation which must accompany it.

Cree educator Wally Isbister (1998:84) maintains that:

> The educational system has taught Aboriginal children to think like Europeans, to feel like Europeans and to act like Europeans. As products of the system, Aboriginal adults have learned to think, feel and behave as if their Aboriginality is inferior. A truly inclusive educational system will teach each Aboriginal child to develop an appreciation and responsibility for his or her faculties of thought.

3.3 Current Curriculum- Strong Assimilationist Bent-Exclusion of Aboriginal Knowledges and Languages - Strive for Education Equity

Nick Leech - Crier, a 23-year old Cree journalist writes:

> ...What is it about this history that hurts so bad? This shame and sense of restlessness and dislocation I awaken to on even the best of days? Where does it come from and, more importantly, where will it lead?

> The thing that vexes me most, I think, is the immensely poor quality of public education in this country, in particular with regard to its own past. I myself attended many public schools, for 10 of the most developmental years of my life. Yet, I really do not recollect being taught anything that one might hope would instill at least a basic understanding of the complex historical skeletons lurking in political, social and environmental closets all across the country.

Within the literature in various disciplines as well as within society at large, discussions about various ways of knowing are prevalent. However, the incorporation of various ways of knowing has yet to be put fully into practice within the public school system.

To provide a sense of the discussion that is taking place in regard to the historic and, to a large degree, current exclusion of Aboriginal knowledge(s) we turn to Urion (1999:14), who proposes that the following questions must be addressed in discussions about inclusivity of Aboriginal knowledges:

> How do we combine scientific studies of land, the use of information retrieval systems about land, and social impact studies about people on land, in the context of First Nations knowledge about land—and articulate a school curriculum that prepares First Nations people to make decisions about land (a positive and creative combination, not a problem of conflict)?
>
> What practical techniques and technologies allow us to improve written history with our knowledge of oral history without doing discredit to either?

In a paper entitled *Teachers' Views on Aboriginal Students Learning Western and Aboriginal Science*, Glen Aikenhead and Bente Huntley (1999:172) attempt to ascertain "[w]hy ...Aboriginal students avoid science in high school and university?" To answer that question Aikenhead and Huntley asked teachers in northern Saskatchewan how they address the issue of teaching science in a manner that incorporates Western and Aboriginal knowledges. Based on their research Aikenhead and Huntley (1999:159) claim that:

> Barriers to accommodating the cultures of Western and Aboriginal science in classrooms were found to be: conceptual (not recognizing science as a culture); pedagogical (not understanding that students' preconceptions can interfere with learning science and not providing cross-cultural instructions for students); ideological (blaming students for not taking senior science classes); psychological (differing responses to cultural

conflict in the classroom); cultural (schools promoting memorization rather than deep understanding, some students feeling disconnected form their Indigenous cultures, and some people not supporting Aboriginal knowledge in science classes); and practical (insufficient resources for teachers and students).

In an article entitled *Enabling the Autumn Seed: Toward a Decolonized Approach to Aboriginal Knowledge, Language, and Education*, Marie Battiste, who is a scholar and member of the Mi'kmaq Nation (1998:17) observes that:

> Despite the constitutional reform in Canadian society, Aboriginal languages and knowledge are not yet flourishing in the education systems. Canadian education systems have not empowered the enormous creativity of Aboriginal languages, and First Nations schools have not used them widely. ...The provincial curricula continue to disinherit Aboriginal languages and knowledge by ignoring their value. Underlying this neglect is the belief that Aboriginal languages and knowledge do not belong in the education system.

Battiste (1998:22) maintains that:

> Few academic contexts exist in which to talk about Indigenous knowledge, as most literature dealing with Aboriginal knowledge would like to categorize it as being peculiarly local and not connected to the normative knowledge. The fact that public schools do not offer any real examination of knowledge bases or ways of knowing is a reflection of what the universities offer as well. ...The negative innuendoes in the identification of the peculiarities of Indigenous knowledge are the result of European ethnocentrism based on one theory of diffusionism (Blaut, 1993) in which knowledge is thought to be diffused from a European center to its periphery.
>
> ...Eurocentricism is not like a prejudice from which informed peoples can elevate themselves. In schools and universities, traditional academic studies support and reinforce the Eurocentric contexts and consequences, ignoring Indigenous world views, knowledge, and thought, while claiming to have superior grounding in Eurocentric history, literature, and philosophy.
>
> The universality of Eurocentricism creates a strategy of difference that leads to racism... .

In an article entitled *Culturally Negotiated Education in First Nations Communities: Empowering Ourselves for Future Generations* , Mohawk consultant Brenda Tsioniaon LaFrance (2000:101-102) speaks to the issue of cultural negotiation as it relates to "Indian Education". She observes that:

> Numerous studies and commissions that examine "Indian Education" have been conducted over the past two centuries. However, the larger society has continually failed to recognize that schooling involves cultural negotiation. People of colour worldwide have always recognized the need for education - that is not the debate. The divergence occurs around the concept of "education."
>
> First Nations people have long understood that education is a lifelong continuum of experience gleaned from interaction with one another, with all of nature (seen and unseen), as well as with all of the cosmos. ...
>
> The Akwesasne School Board decided to approach schooling from a cultural perspective and to undertake the **blending** of **Mohawk and Western education**....
>
> Many Mohawk parents and Elders support teaching from the perspective of Mohawk ancestors, the "science and mathematics" that will enable youth to walk forward in this world with, on the one hand, the First Nations teachings and wisdom, and on the other, an understanding of the Western way of knowing. **Only then will youth be able to see the relevance of Western education to their way of life**. [emphasis added].

The report entitled *Improving School Success for First Nations Students* (1998) (Kamloops/Thompson School District) suggests that:

> What is apparently needed is not more curriculum, but succinct advice as to how First Nations perspectives might more easily be inserted into on-going lesson topics.

Last, inclusive or balanced curriculum is more than simply the decolonization of our shared history, albeit this is of vital importance. However, integration of Aboriginal art, literature, math, science into the curriculum is also important.

3.4 Failure to Accommodate Aboriginal Students Holistically, Which Includes the Emotional, Mental, Physical and Spiritual

Regarding a holistic approach to education, an approach advocated by RCAP report (1996), the research that has been conducted recently on a holistic approach to education reveals that such an approach "can be an effective way of maintaining psychological well being" (Dei et. al. 2000:67). This is said to be particularly significant to young learners" in the formative years where identity and social understandings begin to develop" (Dei 2000:67).

Examples of the manner in which the holistic approaches to learning could be accommodated within the public school system are presented below. For instance, the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (*1996:484) recommends the "acknowledgment of spiritual, ethical and intuitive dimensions of learning."

Furthermore, John W. Friesen contends that:

> Cultural teachers in First Nations communities place a great deal of emphasis on spirituality - not to be confused with forms of organized religion! These teachers stress that each individual human has been designed by the Creator, and each of us has a specific purpose to fulfill on earth. [in *The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs*, June 2000, pp. 9]

Then, in an article entitled *An Analysis of Western, Feminist and Aboriginal Science Using the Medicine Wheel of the Plains Indians*, Lillian Dyck (1998:92) asks:

> How does one cultivate the creative or spiritual aspects of doing science?

A professor in Neuropsychiatry Research Unit, Dyck, who is of Cree and Asian ancestry, responds to her own question, stating that:

> All I can offer now as an answer is that it requires a scientist who incorporates spiritual practices into her/his personal life and thus has the tools to apply to her/his professional scientific life. [1998:92]

3.5 The Effects of Hidden Curriculum

The consultations stressed the importance of examining the effects of hidden curriculum as it relates to Aboriginal students within the public education system. In an article entitled *Factors and Themes in Native Education and School*

Boards/First Nations Tuition Negotiations and Tuition Agreement Schooling, George E. Burns (1998:64) maintains that:

> It is also important to point out that the **informal or hidden aspects of schooling** (i.e., course selection, and promotion practices; school calendars; celebrations; ceremonies including awards and graduation ceremonies; assemblies; concerts; athletics; bulletin boards; hallway displays; art; etc.) **influence students**. The hidden curriculum (Apple, 1990) of a school affects students' aspirations, expectations; activities, attitudes, values, self-esteem; self-concept, motivation, and norms of student achievement. All of these come together to influence the ability of Native students as a minority to identify with and connect to the school in both meaningful and productive ways. [emphasis added]

From a slightly different perspective, John W. Friesen argues that:

> In labelling children as "gifted" or "not gifted" rather than calling attention to their specific abilities, ...we begin thinking that children are naturally clustered into two well-defined groups, "gifted" and "non-gifted" . [in *The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs*, June 2000, pp. 9]

3.6 Failure to Address Reading and Math Difficulties

Consultation suggests the need to examine the issue of forced promotion and the public school system's failure to address reading difficulties that students face. The research implies that as children progress through the system their inability to read becomes an increasing liability. Eventually youth simply drop out of the system. In that regard, the report commissioned by the Kamloops/Thompson School District conveys that:

> A local survey of First Nations secondary students does suggest that their expressed career aspirations are not too dissimilar from the general student population.... . One thing not common to the majority population is the larger percentage of First Nations students arriving at secondary school with poor language and mathematics skills, and the difficulty they have with this deficiency. Once again, it is just as likely that unsuccessful non-First nations students with similar deficits are just as discouraged as First Nations students, and just as often abandon school in spite of their aspirations.

The Report points out, that there is research showing that the way schools support First Nations students at risk is not as effective and sensitive to need as teachers believe. A more proactive relationship with First Nations families, a different kind of participation of classroom teachers in the support process, and more flexibility in the application of procedures related to student responsibilities are implied by the research.

4. Socio-Economic Conditions - Poverty

Adverse socio-economic conditions prevent Aboriginal children and youth from participating fully in the public education system by creating unfavourable environments for learning. The role of socio-economic conditions upon the experiences of Aboriginal children and youth within the public school system has been addressed by various individuals. The works of some of those individuals are presented below.

In an article entitled *Aboriginal Teachers and Education Reform* (1995) Rick Hesch, who teaches in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, reviews the experiences of four Aboriginal pre-service teachers enrolled in the Saskatchewan Urban Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP). Based on his (1995:107) conversations with those individuals he contends that:

> The relatively high "drop-out" rates by Aboriginal students from schools continues to be a concern for educational policy-makers. Typically, concern is registered about the "unique" characteristics of these students, who are judged to often have weak self-concepts and need for special attention. Reforms called for have usually taken the form, for example, of extra counselling and new curricula which celebrates Aboriginal traditions. Implicitly, the focus of concern remains the students and their presumed "cultural deficits." Seldom do academics, politicians, and policy-makers examine more fundamental, commonplace characteristics of schooling which motivate Aboriginal students to leave. Even more rarely are **factors** which may connect Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' experiences of school, **such as social class**, taken into account.
>
> In fact, **many Aboriginal students** learn to **detest schooling** for **similar reasons as other working-class adolescents**—reasons inherent to conventional schooling, rather than their personal, family, or cultural backgrounds. The primary exception is, for some, the differential experience of racism. [emphasis added]

The literature also recognizes poverty and other socio-economic realities faced by Aboriginal families as one of the repercussions of the past, and suggests how education is a factor in how the cycle is perpetuated. B. Sullivan (1988) maintains that:

> Unless the health, social, and economic conditions of Native lives are generally improved, the problems of language development and lower-than-average educational attainment levels will regrettably remain a part of the Native experience at schools. [in *Summary Report of Selected First Nations Education Documents*, Deborah Jeffrey, 1999]

The relationship between adverse socio-economic conditions and education was revealed in *Unequal Access: A Canadian Profile of Racial Differences in Education, Employment and Income*, a report prepared for the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. The report, which examines education, employment, and income profiles among "racial (visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples) and non-racialized groups in Canada," disclosed that:

> Of all groups, Aboriginal peoples are the most disadvantaged in education, employment, and income. [2000: 13]
>
> ...even when Aboriginal peoples and foreign-born minorities have a university education, they are still less likely than non-racialized groups to have incomes in the top 20% of the income scale. [2000:37]

Locally, and more recently, on January 2, 2001, findings from the first stage of a project that maps the school readiness of kindergarten children were discussed in the *Vancouver Sun*. The project is being conducted by Clyde Hertzman, an University of British Columbia epidemiologist specializing in population health. Initial findings reveal:

> Socioeconomic differences in neighbourhoods seemed incredibly predictive of kids' readiness for school. Further, findings in all the readiness tests used, (including social competence, emotional security, physical health and well being, communication skills and language and cognitive development) show that students living in the bottom 10 percentile all lived in the Mount Pleasant, Downtown Eastside and northeast sectors of the city (of Vancouver). [Karen Gram, 2001: B1; B3]

These parts of the city arguably correspond with a concentration of population of Aboriginal families and subsequent school enrollments.

The last example highlighted in this section is the *Ottawa Aboriginal Head Start Program: Evaluation Report 1997-1998.* The Report, prepared by Baxter & Associates (1998:1) describes a program intended to address the barriers to education which result from adverse social and economic conditions:

> The Ottawa Aboriginal Head Start Program (OAHSP) is a federal initiative supported by Health Canada. The project is designed to address the pre-school need for Aboriginal families, with focus on children from two to five (2-5) years of age. The project programming concentrates on basic school readiness, socialization and self-awareness skill, promotion of healthy living and exposure to traditional Aboriginal teachings, language and cultural identity.
>
> ...The OAHSP is offered to families considered to be in a high risk category. The primary definition of high risk comprises those families that have at least one of the following factors (single parent status, children with special needs, a net monthly household income of $1,000 or less, and caregivers with education level of lower than grade 12).

5. Over-Representation of Aboriginal Students in Special Education Categories

Statistics released by the Ministry of Education reveal that in British Columbia Aboriginal students are disproportionately represented in all Special Education categories with the exception of the Gifted category (*An Overview of Aboriginal Education Results for Province of BC*, May 1, 2000, Ministry of Education). Consultation with key educators confirm that this issue warrants a critical examination.

For one, there are questions surrounding assessment processes, with indication that unexamined beliefs about Aboriginal children and a lack of culturally sensitive assessment tools may sometimes lead to inappropriate labeling. In other cases, children who need assessment are not able to access it. There is also a need to examine the consequences of labeling Aboriginal children. Categorizing and labeling are recognized as acts of power. Consultation with key educators reveals that the Aboriginal parenting community is largely excluded from the process.

Regarding the issue of Special Education Categories and labeling Lorna Williams (2000: 142) observes:

> The school system has a history of assessing and labeling students for special placement. In the Vancouver School District 20 percent of the students in special remedial behavior disorder classes are First Nations, and they make up 40 percent of the students in communications classes. In one inner-city school sixty-five students, out of a total First Nations populations of seventy-two, are being assessed by the school-based team. Student transfers out of the home school continue to be regarded as an option for First Nations students, even when schools have increased resources.

Further on the subject of labeling, in a report entitled *We Are All Related* Elizabeth Wilson and Sandra Martin (1997: 27) note that:

> Another problem area is that we tend with First Nations students to label them immediately with preconceptions. We say there will be problems, that they won't be academic students. We categorize and judge them too early. I don't know how we're going to change that. Kids know about these expectations. We need high expectations—we need to tell them we know they can do well, we believe in them.

Kavanagh (1997:46) discusses how the same children may not qualify for support that they need, with negative consequences:

> Of particular concern to most First Nations are children who fall within a "grey area" - meaning those children who have some Special Needs, but whose needs are not considered severe enough for the child to be deemed eligible for "Special Needs Programming." Such children are often put into a regular classroom, but are then noted as "problem" children - a situation which is extremely detrimental for the children.

Finally, there is the issue of inadequate resources for special needs. This lack of resources, combined with a lack of specific programming, particularly affects the ability of schools to provide education for children with fetal alcohol syndrome or fetal alcohol effects (FAS/FAE). As Fournier and Crey note (1997:197-198):

> The challenge facing educators is how to find sufficient resources for all special-needs children, not only those with FAS/FAE. As in many other provinces in Canada, the B.C. education ministry insists FAS/FAE children can be taken care of through programs designed for children with vastly different physical or mental disabilities, or simply plunked down in a

typical classroom. The result can be chaos. In schools with large numbers of alcohol-affected children, a high special-needs population and complex social problems including poverty, the education system appears to throw up its hands and abandon every child equally. It is only the most determined advocates who can fight the school and ministry bureaucracies to obtain learning assistance, diagnosis and counselling support for alcohol-affected children.

Analysis and Recommendations

The research confirms that Aboriginal learners are not benefiting from the public school system to the same degree as non-Aboriginal learners. In this document we set out to explore the individual, institutional, and systemic practices that perpetuate racism and discrimination within the public school system, and thus serve to alienate Aboriginal learners. We unpacked these primary themes (i.e., racism and discrimination) by discussing issues of control, at both a macro and micro level, within the organizational structure around public education; the under-representation of Aboriginal teachers and support staff; curriculum; the need for cross cultural and anti-discriminatory education for all staff and students; socio-economic conditions; and over-representation of Aboriginal children in Special Education Categories.

We entered this discussion approximately five years after the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP 1996) was submitted to the Prime Minister and released to the public in November 1996. The creators of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP 1996) envisioned a new partnership between Aboriginal Peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on: recognition, respect, sharing, and responsibility. To achieve that new partnership the Commissioners made various recommendations, including recommendations concerning Aboriginal learners. More specifically, Commissioners advised making available culturally appropriate early childhood education that is guided by Aboriginal parental and community choice. In regard to elementary and secondary schooling, *Gathering Strength*, RCAP(1996) (Vol. 3) emphasized Aboriginal involvement in governance of education whether on reserve or in cities and towns, the development of inclusive and balanced curriculum, expansion of Aboriginal teacher training, and recognition of the importance of revitalizing Aboriginal languages (Castellano 2000:269). These recommendations echo previous reports, studies, and conferences.

The reality is that five years after the production and dissemination of *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996), and the identification of 44 recommendations that could address the situation of Aboriginal learners:

> the gap Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational levels grows wider. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has dissolved, its mandate

> completed. ... And it is left to citizens of good will to hold governments to their public commitments to a partnership with Aboriginal peoples based on mutual respect and recognition, responsibility and sharing. [Castellano 2000:275]

Based on the research and consultation it is clear that there is a need to further educate the public about the issues. We also need a provincial forum that can be the catalyst to develop the agreements, understanding and processes that will lead to a new relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the public school system.

In British Columbia, a report entitled *Improving School Success For First Nations Students* (1998) (Kamloops/Thompson) was released two years after RCAP. The Report (1998) comments on past studies and conferences on Aboriginal education and makes recommendations for the future. The Report (1998) conveys that the situation in regard to Aboriginal learners:

> ... remains unsolved in spite of a multitude of studies and conferences, tells us that maybe the catch phrases and dialogues that have grown up around the problem, should be put to one side in favour of fresh ones. That the old dialogues have produced little in the way of change suggest that new approaches are in order, dialogues that call up new experiments in classroom and in First Nations communities.

The Report suggests that:

> ... what is needed is a new invention. For the school district and the communities to strike out on an entirely new path would require not only new insights but a lot of courage. Other paths would seem to only slightly modify and to perpetuate what is. It is time to break from the traditional mold and move on to solutions.

The research and consultation imply an urgent need for a discussion that can articulate a re-structured system, one that reflects the unique position that Aboriginal Peoples occupy within this country and, province. Our research suggests that the following challenges are key to achieving education equity and social justice in the public school system:

1. Control, Consultation, Partnerships - Need for Shared Decision Making

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood produced a landmark policy statement, "Indian Control of Indian Education." In their policy paper the National Indian Brotherhood stated that Aboriginal Peoples, rather than the federal government, should be controlling educational programs. Our literature search and consultation implies that the issues of jurisdiction and control are far from being resolved.

Currently, within the public school system, there are a number of authorities which have influence over the education of Aboriginal and other children in British Columbia. Some of the key players involved include:

1. Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada;
2. BC Ministry of Education;
3. BC College of Teachers;
4. School Boards;
5. District Superintendents; Principals; Vice Principals;
6. Teachers; Support Staff;
7. Local Education Committees;
8. First Nations Education Committees;
9. First Nations Education Coordinators;
10. Parents; Greater Aboriginal Community and,
11. Students.

To facilitate discussion we recommend that THE COMMISSION strive to create a forum to re-address key concepts "Control," "Consultation," and "Partnership" so that all players notions of partnership evolve on a level playing field. Some of the issues that might be explored in this context include:

- Jurisdiction;
- Under-representation of Aboriginal Peoples in key positions;
- Impact of current legislation (i.e., School Act);
- Targeted funding; accountability; and,
- Consequences of not working toward an equitable partnership.

2. Aboriginal Parenting Community - Need for Shared Decision Making

The literature reveals that historically and currently the Aboriginal parenting community has been, and continues to be, marginalized in the public education system. Many education researchers say that Aboriginal parents must play a major role in the education of their children and yet they are generally excluded from the decision making process. Therefore, it is necessary to create a separate forum for Aboriginal parents to talk about their experiences and engender a discussion that explores what new partnerships might look like. Discussions might be framed around the following issues:

- Aboriginal parents' perceptions of their current relationship with school system;
- Aboriginal parents' definition of success as it relates to the public school system;
- Current strengths of the public school system;
- Current barriers faced by their children;
- How the school system can recognize and address the legacy of residential schools, boarding homes and the ongoing issues related to apprehension of Aboriginal children; and,
- Suggestions for re-structuring the system (e.g., Aboriginal community as role models and educators; representation on school boards).

3. Aboriginal Youth - Historically Marginalized in the Process

The Royal Commission (1996) and other key reports have documented the marginalization that Aboriginal youth experience in regard to their education. Therefore, we recommend that the Commission create a forum where the voices of youth can be heard. Discussion might be framed to include:

- Strengths and limitations of school; role models; reading and math;
- Issues of identity; self-esteem; cultural affirmation;
- The issue of transition (from reserve to public schools, from elementary to secondary schools);
- Career aspirations; relevance of schooling;

- Issue of safety; general school environment; interaction with students & staff;
- Factors outside of school; and,
- Youth involvement in decision-making
- Suggestions for improvements;

4. Aboriginal Teachers and Aboriginal Support Staff

The research and consultation implies that in order to achieve education equity the under-representation and role of Aboriginal teachers and support staff in the public education system warrants discussion. Discussions might be framed to include:

- Employment equity;
- Aboriginal teachers and support staff: their roles; their issues and barriers within the system; and,
- Aboriginal teachers and support staff: expectations - self imposed and external.

5. (a) Core Curriculum

A literature search and consultation with key educators note the exclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and languages from the current provincial curriculum. The problem of exclusion is perpetuated by the system's failure to recognize that curriculum is very much contested terrain. Therefore, with the intent of achieving education equity the Commission might facilitate a discussion that examines:

- Recognition that knowledge is constructed;
- Consequences for ALL students of not decolonizing the current curriculum;
- Role of Ministry of Education in funding an accurate portrayal of the history of this land and a balanced curriculum for ALL students;
- Current disinheriting of Aboriginal languages and knowledges;
- Integration of Aboriginal art, literature, math, science into the curriculum; and,
- What is needed to effectively implement changes to the curriculum.

5. (b) Influence of Hidden Curriculum

Research implies that the informal or hidden aspects of schooling all come together to influence the ability of Aboriginal students as a minority to identify with and connect to the school in both meaningful and productive ways. Therefore, discussions should be framed to critically examine the influence of:

- Course selection, and promotion practices;
- School calendars; Celebrations; Ceremonies; Assemblies; and,
- After school activities (e.g., athletic activities; musical groups).

6. Cross Cultural and Anti-Discriminatory Education For ALL Staff and Students

The literature and consultation suggests the need to explore of issue of cross cultural and anti-discrimination education for all staff and students. Issues to be addressed include:

- Role of education in examining how structures perpetuate racism and discrimination;
- Role of education in examining how knowledge is constructed and validated
- Role of education in addressing how attitudes are learned and how they might be changed,
- Cross cultural training that will enable all teachers to help all students address the ignorance and hatred of racism; and,Holistic approach to learning.

7. Socio-Economic Factors

In the long term, achieving equality in education is linked to ending other social and economic inequities. However, consultation and a review of key documents suggest it is an immediate priority for the education system to consider and address the adverse socio-economic conditions that create unfavourable environments for learning and prevent Aboriginal children and youth from

participating fully in schools. To understand the relevant issues, and develop strategies that address socio-economic, the discussion might be framed to include:

- Economic marginalization or poverty;
- Health - drug and alcohol abuse;
- Teenage pregnancies;
- Lack of perceived opportunities in the workplace; and
- Possible partnerships: Public school system, community agencies and, Aboriginal parenting community.

8. Special Education Categories

Aboriginal students are disproportionately represented in all Special Education categories with the exception of the Gifted category. Statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education and consultation with key educators indicate that the issue warrants a critical examination. Discussion might be framed to include:

- Resources needed to meet the needs of children;
- Issue of labeling;
- Special education assessment and placement processes and practices;
- Role of Aboriginal parenting community in assessment;
- FAS/FAE - assistance, diagnosis, and counselling support; and,
- The importance of taking a holistic approach and acknowledging all aspects of the child.

Recommendations For Additional Research:

1) RCAP Report

The RCAP Report (RCAP 1996) was submitted to the Prime Minister and released to the public in November 1996. The question is has it made a difference? Have the education recommendations of the RCAP Report been acted upon?

Given significance of the RCAP Report (RCAP 1996) it is recommended further research be conducted to determine whether the 44 recommendations in the Education chapter of Volume 3 have been addressed by the Ministry of Education for one and the various school districts for another.

2) Education of the Educators

The literature suggests that educators:

> ...do not, and have not been encouraged to view themselves as intellectuals. There is indeed a resistance to viewing their work as being political or concerning knowledge as socially constructed rather than as merely given. They are concerned with skills and processes of instruction that are uncritically derived from the research literature dominated by psychological studies of learning and development. They see only the benign aspects of their work with children and there is strong resistance to any investigation of ideological foundations of their professional knowledge. [Stokes 1997:208]

Williams J. Stokes (1997:211), whose own work is shaped by Paulo Freire, observes:

> That teachers may be contributing to silencing and marginalizing their students is unexamined, because the teachers themselves have been silenced. Domesticated teachers resist analysis and critique of power relations in schools...

It is recommended there be further research which focuses on post-secondary institutes and that the intellectual preparation of teachers as well as professional development of teachers be examined.

3) Impact of Boarding Schools

Consultation with various key educators and a literature search reveals that further work needs to be conducted in the area of boarding schools. More specifically, the impact of boarding schools upon the experiences of Aboriginal learners in the public schools system warrants further consideration.

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